

Genesis 24:29-67, No. 39

“Coram Deo”

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Last time we read vv. 10-28 of this same chapter 24, which verses relate the encounter between Abraham's servant and Rebekah at the well of Nahor. The remainder of the chapter recapitulates everything that had happened so far and carries the story forward to its conclusion.

Text Comment

- v.30 We will learn subsequently that Laban was a man to notice the expensive jewelry!
- v.33 Hospitality was deeply rooted in ancient near eastern culture. It is today still much more a feature of Middle Eastern culture than it is of western culture.
- v.41 The servant recapitulates what we have already read, with some additional detail which, in an oral culture, would make the repetition not monotonous but emphatic. [Sarna, 167]
- v.45 Always remember, for most of history the Bible was *heard* not *read*, even by those who revered it as the Word of God. This is why we read, even as late as in Revelation 1:3: “Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those *who hear...*”
- v.50 It is interesting that Laban seems to be in charge even though his father, Bethuel, was present. It is possible that Bethuel was an old man and too feeble to be responsible for such matters. It is also possible that in that culture the adult brother or brothers of the daughters of the family had responsibility for their sisters’ marriages. [Sarna, 168] Their statement amounts to, “we have no choice in the matter because obviously the Lord has spoken.”
- v.57 This may have been in many respects an “arranged” marriage, but the consent of the bride was still required – as it was in ancient near eastern marriage customs generally.
- v.59 We learn in 35:8 that this nurse's name was Deborah. She was to prove a faithful servant to the next two generations of the family, dying finally in Jacob's household.
- v.60 For Rebekah's family, this was a conventional blessing. For the reader of Genesis, the words are much more powerful, echoing as they do God’s promise to Abraham in 22:17.
- v.64 Notice the similar wording in both cases. Each of them *lifted up his or her eyes and saw*. The wording suggests simultaneousness, instant recognition, what we might call “love at first sight.” [cf. Sarna, 170]
- v.65 The veil was a sign of betrothal and marriage -- the bride was presented to the groom veiled. We still use a veil for the bride today. Generally in the ancient near east women

were not veiled and Israelite women did not ordinarily wear a veil. There was nothing like the custom that prevails still today in some segments of Islam.

- v.67 Abraham, as we said before, seems to be out of the picture by now. Rebekah was taken into Sarah's tent. It would have been improper for her to have been brought to Isaac's tent before the wedding, but bringing her into Sarah's tent – Sarah, of course, had died by this time – demonstrated to everyone the position she would occupy. She was to be the new matriarch of the covenant family.

The first reference to “love” in the Bible was in 22:2, in reference to Abraham's love for his son Isaac. The second is found here in reference to the bond between husband and wife. The most important love, the strongest and the best love, is the love that follows marriage, a truth Hollywood seems unable to comprehend.

One of the challenges of preaching through the narratives of the Bible, as I often do, is presented by this morning's long reading. It is virtually a repetition of what we considered last time and thus the burden of our text this morning is the same as the burden of the text upon which the last sermon was preached. What am I to do?

As often happens, however, the Lord came to my rescue. For Christmas I received from my wife the three volumes of James O'Donnell's commentary on Augustine's *Confessions*. Now I want you to concentrate on the sermon and not spend the time worrying about me, so let me say that O'Donnell wasn't my *only* Christmas present. I also got a bag of peanut M&Ms.

Anyway, as I began to read O'Donnell's introduction, I realized that I had a perfect *entre* into the burden of the second half of Genesis 24 and, in addition, a very fine sermon subject for New Year's Day. What I realized was that we have in this text a perfect picture of your life and mine as it ought to be lived every day, and a perfect reminder of what, as Christians, we must never forget, however tempted we are to forget it and however hard we must struggle to remember it. Ours is a unique life, yours and mine, very different from the life of the people around you who are not followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is hard for us to remember that; harder still to live in that uniqueness. At least I find it so. That we have so much repetition in the chapter only forces us to reckon with the obvious, the very thing we are inclined to take for granted.

Most of you will be familiar with Augustine's *Confessions*. In a poll or survey conducted a few years ago, it was named the most influential Christian book in history. The work begins:

“You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised...”

And a few lines later we find the famous insight that has ever since shed a bright light on human existence and experience:

“You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

You will notice, and, of course you know if you have read the book, that it is cast from start to finish in the form of *a conversation with God*. It is one of the utterly unique and original things about the book. No one had ever written anything like it. There is no precedent in classical or Christian literature. It's beginning, words addressed to God, and its continuation in that same vein leads James O'Donnell to say,

“This opening can give rise to the disconcerting feeling of coming into a room and chancing upon a man speaking to someone who isn't there. He gestures in our direction and mentions us from time to time, but he *never addresses his readers*. [II, 8-9]

But now what has that to do with Genesis 24? Well, just this. What we see in this chapter, especially through the eyes of Abraham's faithful servant, is the same thing: and it is how the believing life goes, or ought to go.

Think about what is described here. On one level there is the swirl of human life: physical movement, thought, activity, effort, obligation, hope, longing, personal encounter, and the management of relationships. We have here a trip, a plan, a conversation, an agreement, and an obligation undertaken and satisfied. Are these not the ingredients of our daily life? Is this not how we live? And at one level God seems to be out of the picture as the servant makes his way eastward, meets Rebekah, negotiates with her family, and brings her home.

On the other hand, this entire history of the servant's seeking and finding a wife for Isaac is also and just as much the record of the nearness of the Lord to his people, his provision for them, and their sense of and reliance upon God's being with them to help them. The living God, the God of Abraham and Abraham's servant, the God of the covenant is not one who, as Thomas Carlyle put it, “sits on the hills, since the first Sabbath, careless of mankind.” To be sure, he is great, great beyond our power to comprehend in his infinite power and presence. But he is also one who watches over Israel, and walks with his people with tender affection and interest. This point is beautifully portrayed in the three prayers of this servant, each of which marks a turning point in the story. *This is the history of a believing man's conversation with God!*

As I said last time, his prayers are what the old writers used to call “arrow prayers.” These are not the prayers that Daniel prayed, three times a day facing toward Jerusalem. These are not the prayers our Savior prayed, early in the morning and late at night. These are not the prayers that a believer prays, morning and evening, when he offers to God the worship of his heart and asks those blessings of him that any faithful Christian should seek day by day. These are the prayers of the moment, the prayers called forth suddenly by something happening, or by words that are spoken, or by an opportunity that presents itself. This is the prayer that Nehemiah prayed in the brief moment that separated the king's asking what he wanted and Nehemiah's reply (Neh. 2:4). *This is the speech of a man for whom God is always at hand!*

Three such prayers punctuate this narrative: 1) the prayer the servant prayed as he arrived at the well in v. 12, which prayer he mentions again in v. 42; 2) the prayer of thanksgiving he prayed after Rebekah behaved as she did at the well, mentioned in v. 26 and again in v. 48; 3) and, finally, the prayer of v. 52, the thanksgiving he gave to God in the presence of Rebekah's family,

a prayer he prayed even though doing so interrupted his conversation with the family, a prayer he prayed before he brought out the gifts to seal the agreement.

God was so much *a living presence* to this good man, God's nearness was so real to him, that it was the most natural thing for him to communicate with the Almighty on a moment's notice his concerns and his gratitude. So real was the presence of God, so much did he practice that presence, that in the presence of people whose theology was doubtfully the same as his, the servant did not scruple to bow down and speak to God even though doing so required his hosts to wait in their own living room until he was done!

The living God was too near to him for him to imagine that God was not always and in everything the one with whom he had to do; the knowledge of God's nearness was such a power and a pleasure to Abraham's servant that it was entirely natural for him to see his life in terms of his being always before God or face to face with God – what the Latin “*coram Deo*” means – walking with God, free to speak *to* God about what he wanted, what was happening, and what had happened.

Human life humming along, one thing leading to another, a person busy with his obligations, in conversation with others, accomplishing something *yet, all the while with one eye upward, seeing God there*. Humanity and deity in the swirl of human life. That *is* the Christian life in its fundamental nature. We live and work, we love and laugh, we mourn and worry, we plan and accomplish as human beings do and will. But never unaware of that unseen presence who sees us, who stands ready to give us help and grant meaning to everything we do.

You have this beautifully illustrated, by the way, in the production of Augustine's *Confessions*. We tend to imagine Augustine writing his masterpiece – this long, intimate conversation with God – at his desk, as an author might today, sitting alone, the paper – or what passed for paper in those days – before him, perhaps with his Bible open at his side. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Augustine didn't actually *write* the *Confessions*, not at least in the strict sense of the word. Of course he didn't type it on his laptop, but he didn't write it down on paper or papyrus either. All of his sermons, books, and letters were dictated to scribes. Even a book as personal and in some ways as private as the *Confessions* was dictated. It was the scribe who handled what was in those days the clumsy business of putting pen to papyrus scroll. Writing on scrolls was a ponderous activity, the scroll having to be held open at the place where words were being added line by line. The pens had to be trimmed, the ink mixed. It required special expertise that scribes had gained through long practice. Then copies were made from the master as one scribe read out the text to a number of other scribes in the room who then created their own copies.

So as you think of Augustine writing his masterpiece, imagine instead a busy room with several tables and a number of people, some taking dictation, some assisting in the manipulation of the scrolls, some preparing the ink or the pens. Once again the swirl of human life, its busyness, its activity, its accomplishment. But, all the while, here is Augustine talking directly and so personally to God.

“You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised; great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable. Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you.... Grant me Lord to know and understand...”

Is that not the same picture of our life as is furnished here in Genesis 24: an endless conversation with the invisible God amidst the swirling activity of our daily human life? And is not the lesson of that text, therefore, that, in the words of Anna Waring, we too should aspire to have what she describes as:

“a mind to blend with outward life while keeping at thy side”?

And is this not the perfect New Year’s resolution for any serious Christian: that he or she should commit, in Brother Lawrence’s famous phrase, “to practice the presence of God.”

Is that not what this servant did? He practiced the presence of God. He did what Christian believers do and must do. He lived his life, he made plans and executed them, he talked to various people about various things, he went to bed at night and got up in the morning, he had his successes and, no doubt, some failures, suffered his aches and pains after long days on his camel, ate his meals morning, noon, and night, and on and on – the ordinary stuff of human life, features that don’t really distinguish our lives from anyone else’s. *But the difference was this:* all along, throughout the day, as events unfolded predictably or unpredictably, he was alive to the presence of God. Request, acknowledgement, and gratitude poured forth from him to God throughout the day as one thing happened after another.

The most influential of Francis Schaeffer’s books, and one of the most influential Christian books of the second half of the 20th century, was *The God who is There*, first published in 1968. Read the title this way: The God who is *There!* Everyone has some sense of God. Most people believe in his existence. But comparatively few think and behave as if he were really *there*, that is, *there* before me, *there* with me, *there* for me at every moment. But that is precisely what we are everywhere in the Bible taught to believe about God: *that he is there* wherever we are, whatever we are doing. This was always true and always understood, as the arrow prayers of this faithful servant demonstrate already here in Genesis 24. It is only the more certainly the case for us. The Son of God came into the world *to be with us*, to be *there* in that sense. And when he left the world, he promised us that he would be with us until the end of the age. “God with us” is the principle of the Christian life. From that one fact, from that one truth radiate a thousand perspectives, applications, attitudes, understandings, and behaviors.

Sometimes, of course, his presence is felt in a powerful way in the soul, it is demonstrated beyond doubt. Think, for example, of Pascal’s famous “night of fire.”

“The year of grace 1654. Monday, 23 November...from about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past midnight. Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and intellectuals. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace. The God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Forgetfulness of the world and everything except God.”

“Not the God of the philosophers or the intellectuals...” That is a striking thing to be said by one of the greatest of all philosophers and intellectuals. Pascal meant that God was no longer simply an idea or a principle to him. He was a person, a person of infinite majesty and immeasurable love, *and he had found himself in the very presence of this Person! That person was with him in his room.* Encountering him had flooded his soul with joy. So wonderful, so transformative were those few hours *with God* that for the rest of his life he wore his own written account of that meeting, the account from which I just read to you, sewn into his coat, found there by his housekeeper after his death. Augustine did something similar, writing an account of his encounter with God in his *Confessions*.

But we know, only too well, that our experience of God’s presence is hardly always so powerful, so thrilling, so memorable, or so life-changing. Even the servant’s experience of God’s presence and help here is more than we usually get. *We must live by faith.*

A contemporary of Blaise Pascal, an unlearned man, no philosopher or intellectual, in terms of worldly attainment and accomplishment almost the opposite of the great French mathematician, scientist, philosopher, and Christian apologist, was Nicholas Herman of Lorraine, known to Christian history by his monastery name, Brother Lawrence. He was born in 1610, the son of a peasant. He was converted to Christ at 18 years of age. He became a soldier. Wounded in battle, he was lame for the rest of his life. At the age of 40 he entered a monastery as a lay brother and was put to work in the kitchen. Here, in kitchen work, he spent the remaining 40 years of his life. The sheer beauty and quality of his Christian life brought many through the years to seek his guidance. One of these set down an account of four conversations that he had with Brother Lawrence in 1666 and 1667 and this was later published under the title *The Practice of the Presence of God*. That was the principle of his life, the practice of Christ’s presence with him. And there is something very charming and very encouraging about being taught that lesson by a man who “did nothing more sensational than to walk with God about a monastery kitchen for nearly forty years.” [Hugh Martin, *Great Christian Books*, 52] In one memorable passage Brother Lawrence describes his life in these terms:

“...I make it my business only to persevere in His Holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an actual presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God...” [53]

And we catch some sense of what that conversation was like between Brother Lawrence and the Almighty when we read a passage like this.

“I consider myself as the most wretched of men, full of sores and corruption, who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King; touched with a sensible regret I confess to Him all my wickedness, I ask His forgiveness, I abandon myself in His hands, that He may do what He pleases with me. This King full of mercy and goodness, very far from chastising me, embraces me with love, makes me eat at His table, serves me with His own hands, gives me the key of His treasures; He converses and delights Himself with me incessantly, in a thousand and a thousand ways, and treats me in all respects as His favourite. It is thus I consider myself from time to time in His holy presence.

And what is the secret of such a life? He tells us again and again: practice the presence of God. In one passage he writes, “The presence of God; a subject which in my opinion contains the whole spiritual life.”

“Were I a preacher, I should above all other things preach the practice of the presence of God...” “We cannot escape the dangers which abound in life without the actual and continual help of God; let us then pray to Him for it continually. How can we pray to Him without being with Him? How can we be with Him but in thinking of Him often? And how can we often think of Him, but by a holy habit which we should form of it?” [Martin, 54-55]

A few of you may remember John and Rosemary Dunstan of our church in Vancouver B.C. John was an elder. They were English emigres to Canada. I always admired them for their old-style piety; cheerful, devout, lovers of our Reformed faith as the truest human expression of God's glory, raising their children to love and serve the God of their parents. Rosemary had had cancer some years before, but was treated and enjoyed good health until the spring of 1997. One day in May, she became ill quite suddenly. They found brain tumors everywhere. On that first day, John began reading the Psalms to his wife. One psalm for each day to mark the passage of her remaining days. They got to Psalm 62 the day she died. Do you remember Psalm 62? It begins with a refrain that is repeated also later in the psalm.

“My soul finds rest in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.” “Trust in him at all times O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”

You do, like it or not, live your life in the presence of God; so practice that presence with all your heart! It is how life, God's gift to us, ought to be lived: always, everywhere, and certainly in the year of our Lord 2017!